

## Book reviews

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**InfoThink – Practical Strategies for Using Information in Business**, Mary Woodhull Park, Scarecrow Press Inc., Lanham, ISBN 0-8108-3423-3.

Want to enter or remain in the information business? Make sure you read Mary Park's *InfoThink* first. It will not discourage you, but it will ensure you have your feet on the ground and keep your head out of the clouds. Thirty years ago, we really did not know much about the business. Publishers were beginning to use computer assisted printing techniques. The by-product machine readable files just had to be useful. Our job then was to find how to use those electronic marvels. Now, the database is the product and print is the spinoff.

For those wishing to become information professionals, Mary Park presents down-to-earth face-to-face interviews with six practicing, well-respected information professionals. Each interview provides insight into a different aspect of the information business. For a realistic vision of the broker entrepreneur, the discussions with Sue Ruge must not be missed. If you are thinking about becoming a lone information broker, Sue tells it like it really is. Having known Sue for many years, I must say her career is understated. She was there at the beginning!

Ms. Ruge came to our profession with an understanding few had. She understood a concept or idea has no value if it cannot be sold for real money. Sue has been a master at convincing clients to pay for her services. If you are just starting out as a broker, read Mary's chapter on Sue Ruge more than once.

For those of you who have already survived in the information business, Mary provides another seven interviews with actual information users. If you wish to expand your business into new market segments, read these segments first. You just may gain insight into how to approach these new markets.

Competitive intelligence (CI) has become the new information rage. The person or group, who knows how to do it, can find much good, relevant information on competitors or competitive situations in the public or open literature. The interview with Paul Houston, management consultant, provides a road map through CI.

For all of us, Mary completes her coverage of the industry by providing four interviews with information educators and pioneers. For someone just coming into the industry, these interviews provide a useful historic perspective. For those of us who are veterans in the business, reviewing history is useful.

Don't miss the interview with Paul Zurkowski. Paul began his professional career as a Congressional staffer working on copyright issues. He and Bill Knox, Vice President of McGraw-Hill and later an early director of the National Technical Information Service, worked together to form an organization which became the Information Industry Association. Paul's interview synthesizes many of the important issues and ideas coming from his experiences as a pioneer in our business. Paul states that he has always wanted to document the lessons that might be learned from his experiences with the information founders and pioneers, e.g., Abler, Benjamin, Wolpert, Kollegger, Garfield, Summit, Cuadra and others. We could all learn more about our business from such a history.

*InfoThink – Practical Strategies for Using Information in Business* is a book which should be on every information professional's bookshelf.

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**Digital Collections: Museums and the Information Age**, Suzanne Keene, Butterworth–Heinemann, Oxford, Woburn, MA, 1998, 141 pp. ISBN: 0-7506-3456-1.

From implementing a database application to manage the life cycle of objects in museum collections to the development of multimedia gallery exhibitions, this book is an excellent primer on the uses of information technology in museums. While written from the UK point of view, this monograph will be useful to those in other countries as well. A senior manager at the Science Museum in London, the author, Suzanne Keene, has first-hand experience leading the procurement process for museum systems.

The writing and style of presentation in this book are direct and clear. There is an appendix where technical terms are described in more detail, and provides excellent sources for further information about the topics covered in each section of this concise book. Thus the audience for this monograph is broad. Museum directors, non-technical professional staff such as curators and registrars, as well as technically savvy staff will find this book understandable and instructive. Of particular interest to museum directors, Chapters 1 and 2 outline the opportunities for digital collections in museums, and Chapter 8 discusses organizational and staffing issues. Chapters 3–7 discuss the particular functions associated with building and using digital collections to support ongoing museum activities. Chapter 9 provides a brief but well-informed survey of key players in museum information technology worldwide. Finally, Chapter 10 presents scenarios for museum operations in the 21st century.

*Opportunities.* The emergence of ubiquitous digital information and telecommunications technologies pose particular challenges for innovating museums because they have been based on centralized collections of physical objects many of which are unique. Some museums have created detailed, richly contextual information about particular objects, and some have built collections of objects related to those that are particularly valuable. For example, a museum that owns an important painting may also have collected drawings, letters, and other documents by the creator, his friends, colleagues, associates, patrons, and others. Exhibitions of the work often involve further research, writing, and publication. A valuable object or collection will be determined by the mission of the particular museum. So for a science museum, a natural history collection might be as important a work as a masterpiece sculpture for an art museum. Translating these activities into the digital realm poses technical, social, and administrative issues. On the one hand, digital collections can be built and managed based upon the same or similar principles of museum collections. On the other hand, the objectives and outcomes for collections of objects composed of atoms compared to those represented by bits are quite different. Suzanne Keene's book does a good job of pointing out the similarities and differences between physical and virtual collections. She states that most museums (except the national museums) are "somewhat ambivalent about research. Research, however, will become a core task in building the digital collection" (p. 26). She suggests that capturing research for future uses and making connections to existing information will become more significant and wide spread activities in the digital museum environment.

*Functions.* This profound shift for museums from an inward focus on collecting and protecting objects, to a more outward focus on research and sharing will develop incrementally over time through the building of digital collections. Many museums already have sites on the World Wide Web, and those that do not will surely develop them soon. These modest web sites could be the future front gates to digital collections, in much the same way that libraries have provided access to their card catalogs online and begun to create linkages among them. Today, sitting at a PC in a local library, it is possible to access the catalogs of libraries located around the world. Imagine in the not too distant future that from these same PCs at local libraries it will also be possible to access the catalogs of museums around the world. . . and images of objects from those collections. The standards that could enable the incremental development

of such accessible digital collections are discussed in Chapter 5 of this book. Communicating the benefits of standardization in the context of building digital collections is a key value of this book.

At the beginning of each chapter in this book there is a flow diagram outlining the topics and sub-topics covered in the chapter. These diagrams function as an aid to browsing or navigating the information presented in the book. This is not just a clever idea, but an excellent demonstration of a technique for analyzing a complex problem (such as procuring a computer system, building a web site, or developing a multimedia production) by breaking the solution down into discrete and interconnected steps. For example, these diagrams would facilitate the conversion of this book into a hypertext document or web site.

*Key players.* One of the key factors for decision-makers to embrace innovation and change is knowledge of the public and professional landscape as well as the resources that can be relied upon to provide assistance. Chapter 9 provides evidence that supports the notion that “museums are viewed as important players by governments” because they are important providers of the content “that will give us something to do with all this technology” (pp. 90–91). The worldwide summary of government, NGO, and not-for-profit programs and activities related to museums and information technology makes a strong case in support of this idea. This chapter is a must-read for those unfamiliar with the European Union, UK, French, Canadian, Getty Trust, and UNESCO-affiliate International Council of Museums Documentation Committee (CIDOC) activities. The book is sketchier about activities in other countries. The author also does not mention the activities of the US Library of Congress or National Science Foundation, which have recently joined with the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Library of Medicine, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and other agencies to launch a second round of well-funded Digital Library Initiative projects. Unfortunately, the funding and support of many agencies is not a certainty in a rapidly changing world. Since this book was written, the Getty Information Institute, a leader in the development of museum standards and research databases, has been dissolved. The programs, we are told, will be hosted by other entities within the Getty Trust. Other key players including the UK Museum Documentation Association and Canadian Heritage Information Network have also undergone major restructuring during the past few years.

*Scenarios.* Scenario analysis is an excellent tool to facilitate innovation and change. There is no better way than envisioning the future to provide the context for new activities today. The final chapter in this book provides such scenarios for the imaginary Historic City Museum. Beginning with a popular web site, the museum secures funding from diverse sources and partners with other cultural institutions to build a digital collection. Read this book to learn the details about the outcomes. They are all within the realm of possibility based on the state of technology today.

The author uses the term “metadata” only once in this entire book, and then in a non-technical context (see p. 38).

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